

Finding Hannah **Dan Swanson**

The scene of the horrific car accident that greeted visitors to town would not make the Chamber of Commerce proud. A ten-foot high concrete retaining wall, caked with dozens of coats of paint, stood beyond the cracked sidewalk and the telephone pole with layers of flyers in a rainbow of colors. At the base of the wall was a small shrine complete with burnt out candles, dead flowers, and a few soggy teddy bears.

The concrete retaining wall was located on the access road to the small town of Oakton, Virginia, just a short distance from the exit off the highway bypass around town. The narrow two-lane road made a sharp left turn as the access road became Main Street just past the Welcome to Oakton sign.

The wall was an inviting target for every aspiring graffiti artist in the county. It was often adorned with the latest “Bob Loves Sally” public statement of affection or a declaration that “The Bulldogs Suck!” as a symbol of community pride aimed at the mascot of the rival high school in an adjoining town.

The remaining six blocks leading to the center of town, marked with the one traffic light, were lined with boarded up “mom and pop” stores and a Gulf gas station with the familiar orange and blue sign creaking as it swayed in the wind. The long abandoned Coaltown Theater still had the name of the Star Wars movie on the marquee from the showing on the theater’s last night.

In the sixties and seventies, Oakton was a bustling place. Main Street was so crowded on a Saturday night that it was hard to find a parking space. People from miles around flocked to town to shop, buy groceries, see the latest Lone Ranger movie, or eat at the café with the little wall mounted juke boxes on the wall at each formica topped table. Hit songs by Elvis or the Beatles could be played for a nickel or six for a quarter.

The decline of Oakton started with the construction of the highway bypass that took away most of the traffic. The collapse of the coal industry only added to the economic misery. The fate of the town was sealed when the Walmart opened in the county seat twenty miles down the road.

Bill and Linda Mullins met and became high school sweethearts at Oakton High School. Bill was the quarterback on the football team, and Linda was the captain of the cheerleading squad. Everyone in their graduating class assured them that they would some day be husband and wife. They married at the First Baptist Church on the edge of town in June following graduation.

Linda was relieved that she had not started to “show” by the time of the wedding ceremony. She had missed a couple of her periods, and she felt sure that she was pregnant. A visit to the family doctor confirmed her suspicions. She knew that she, Bill, and their baby would face an uncertain future.

Bill’s Dad was a foreman in the non-union coal mine at the end of a winding gravel road that made its way from the “hard top” road up the “holler” just south of town. Even though Bill wanted more out of life than the hard scrabble life that his Mom and Dad had lived, he needed a job. He started work on Monday morning just after his eighteenth birthday.

The baby arrived on November 30. She had blue eyes and curly blond hair. She weighed six pounds and six ounces. They named her Nikki. Before long, Bill, Linda, and Nikki were celebrating their first Christmas together with a small spruce tree that they bought on special in town and a few presents under the tree.

Nikki quickly became the center of their lives. Her earliest photos, starting with the trip home from the hospital when she was born, adorned the refrigerator. These were followed by the photo of her getting on the school bus for her first day at Head Start and the first of her many art projects from school. They proudly displayed her report cards with all A’s and B’s and check marks for attitude and effort.

The years passed too quickly. Nikki progressed to Oakton Elementary School and the Middle School. She soon moved to Oakton High School and the eighth grade. By that time, she was already starting to blossom into a beautiful young woman. Bill and Linda knew that she would soon become the center of attention of every boy in school.

Luckily their fears seemed to be ill founded. Nikki continued to get A’s and B’s in all of her classes, even including the Honors classes in English and History. Like her Mom, she became a cheerleader.

She rushed home one day in October with some big news, “Mom and Dad, I was elected as the Homecoming Queen!”

Bill and Linda beamed with pride as she rode through town in the Homecoming Parade in the back of a red Corvette convertible.

The first signs of any problems came when Nikki starting dating Johnny Jones. He was a year older than Nikki, and he was one of a group of “bad boys” in school. Bill and Linda could understand the attraction. Johnny was six feet and two inches tall with black hair and blue eyes. He didn’t look like “college material”. For the first time, they began to worry about Nikki’s future.

As Nikki entered her senior year, Bill and Linda were excited about her starting to look into colleges. They desperately wanted a better life for her than they had, and they knew that the key to that better life was education. They went with Nikki to the College Night at the high school. Nikki talked to the Admissions Office folks from several four-year colleges, mostly in the Commonwealth of Virginia due to the cost of attendance, and to the local community college. They became concerned that Nikki didn’t seem to be very excited.

The reason for her lack of excitement came at Thanksgiving. Nikki announced to the family that she had decided to take a year off before starting college. Worse yet, she and Johnny had decided that they would move in together after graduation and get jobs in the largest town in the county about twenty miles from Oakton. There was a small manufacturing plant there where Johnny hoped to get a job, and Nikki said that she could work at the Walmart. When they protested, Nikki firmly stated, “Mom and Dad, I am eighteen now, and I can make my own decisions!”

Graduation came, and Nikki moved her personal belongings from her bedroom at home to the one room apartment above the hardware store that she and Johnny rented for \$300 a month. Bill and Linda became concerned that they did not see Nikki as often as they would have liked. When they did see her, she didn’t look very healthy.

Actually, the reality was worse than Bill and Linda’s worst nightmares. Johnny had introduced Nikki to opioids. She had obtained a prescription from a “pill mill” doctor just across the border in Tennessee. Not only was she using opioids, she had a few left over from each prescription to sell to her friends for \$10 a pill.

Nikki's problems only got worse over time. Johnny failed a drug test at the plant and lost his job. When Johnny came home with the bad news, Nikki's news added to their challenges.

"Johnny, I'm pregnant!" she declared as Johnny listened wide eyed. "What are we going to do?" she pleaded almost in tears. They both knew there weren't any easy answers.

Nikki and Johnny decided that they could not tell either of their parents about the pregnancy. They talked about giving the baby up for adoption since they knew they weren't financially stable enough to raise a child. Nikki was able to wear loose fitting clothes to hide her condition during their rare visits to see Bill and Linda. The visits became less frequent as Nikki's due date approached.

Nikki gave birth to a beautiful baby girl at the county hospital. Nikki had continued to use opioids against the advice of her doctor, and the baby was born with neonatal abstinence syndrome or NAS. Nikki could hear her high-pitched cries from the hospital Nursery from her room down the hall. They named the baby Hannah after Nikki's grandmother.

The decision on adoption was one that Nikki and Johnny didn't have to face. The county Social Services Department paid a visit to Nikki in her room the following morning to inform her that Hannah would be placed into foster care until they could find a family to adopt her. Nikki's only request was that the baby be allowed to keep her birth name of Hannah. Nikki dreamed that she could someday be reunited with her baby.

Nikki's dream would end at the concrete retaining wall on the edge of town. Six years had passed since Hannah's birth. Nikki had parted ways with Johnny and gone on to earn a two year degree in business at the community college. She was on the way for an interview for a job as a secretary at a lawyer's office in Oakton, and she was running late as usual. She applied her last few strokes of mascara as she sped toward her appointment. A rain storm had started, and she didn't see the flashing light and sharp left curve sign as she approached the wall. Her car slammed at full speed into the concrete retaining wall. She was killed instantly. Her funeral followed a few days later, and she was buried in the Mullins family cemetery on the edge of town. She took her secret of Hannah's birth with her to the grave.

Hannah and her adoptive family lived across the road from the concrete retaining wall. It had been about a week since she had gotten off the school bus on the way home from her first grade class at Oakton Elementary and noticed the orange paint on the pavement and crash marks on the retaining wall. A Virginia state trooper's car sat near the wall as the police officer completed his report on the accident. She and her family wondered what had happened. An article in the weekly newspaper published on Wednesday described the accident in grim detail.

As Hannah peered out the window in the weeks that followed the accident, she often noticed a woman parked in front of the wall. A small white cross had been placed at the base of the wall near the candles, dead flowers, and teddy bears. Fatal car accidents in the mountains were, unfortunately, not uncommon, and this type of makeshift memorial could be seen around the county. The cross was hand lettered with the words "Love Always" in black letters on the horizontal piece and the name "Nikki" on the vertical piece.

Hannah wondered aloud, "Who was Nikki? Who is this woman at the concrete wall?"

Bill and Linda were haunted about the conditions that led up to Nikki's fatal accident. One of their neighbors had been following Nikki's car as she traveled to the interview. He noticed that she was swerving on the highway while she traveled as the tires on her car alternated between hitting the "rumble strips" on the shoulder and crossing the center white line. Could she have been caught up in the opioids epidemic that was rampant in the area?

The answer to their question came weeks later after the completion of the investigation. The toxicology report came back from the state coroner's office in Roanoke, and it showed, much to their relief, that Nikki did not have any drugs in her system at the time of the accident. The state police investigator called them to say that they had found a mascara brush under the seat in Nikki's crumpled car at the salvage yard. Bill and Linda would have to live with the fact that their daughter died because of applying make up while driving, but that did not make it any easier to accept.

In spite of the police report, gossip about Nikki's death spread quickly around town. Linda was in the local grocery store when she heard two "busy bodied" women that she knew from church in the next aisle.

"Did you hear that that Mullins girl who died in the car crash was using drugs?" one of the women exclaimed in a hushed tone as Linda turned the corner to the aisle.

Both women immediately looked away and proceeded down the aisle with their grocery carts, but the damage was done.

Bill and Linda gradually moved on with their lives. In addition to visiting the shrine at the wall, Linda made regular visits to Nikki's grave to place flowers or little presents at the base of her heart-shaped tombstone. On her visit on Nikki's birthday, she noticed a tall man standing at the grave with his head bowed. As she got closer, she recognized him as Johnny Jones whom she had not seen since the funeral. Johnny seemed startled as she approached him.

"Oh, Mrs. Mullins, I didn't expect to see you here," Johnny offered.

"Johnny, I make a point of coming to Nikki's grave every few weeks. I still miss her so much," Linda replied as her voice cracked a bit.

"Mrs. Mullins, I have my life on track now. I have enlisted in the Army, and I will be shipping off to Afghanistan next week. Since I may not make it back, there is something that I need to tell you," Johnny said as Linda waited in anticipation.

"Well, Nikki and I went through some difficult times when she first moved out. Unfortunately, we both got involved with opioids," Johnny continued. "When we thought that things couldn't get any worse, Nikki found that she was pregnant!"

Linda's jaw dropped as she sought the right words to respond. "Where is the baby?" she asked.

"The baby, a little girl, was born with NAS, and we were forced to give her up for adoption," Johnny stated as his voice quivered. "We never saw her again."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Linda demanded.

"We didn't want to get you involved in our problems," Johnny replied meekly.

"The birth of our only granddaughter is not a problem!"

Their conversation trailed off, and Johnny turned to leave the cemetery. Linda feared that she may never see him again.

As Hannah grew, she noticed that the visits by the woman to the concrete retaining wall became less frequent. Hannah moved on to high school, and she began to focus on her studies and extracurricular activities. She met her first boyfriend. Hannah had just celebrated her eighteenth birthday when her parents said that they would like to talk to her about a family secret.

They sat down on the sofa in the family room after Sunday dinner. Hannah's Mom led off the discussion.

"Hannah, you know how much that we love you, but there some information that we felt that we needed to share with you now that you have turned eighteen."

"Now, Mom, what could that be?" Hannah inquired expecting to hear that they were giving her keys to her first car since she had just gotten her driver's license.

"Honey, we felt that it was important for you to know that your Mom and I could never have kids on our own. Luckily, we were able to adopt you when you were just a newborn baby," her Dad stated as his voice began to crack with emotion.

"So, I'm not your natural born daughter," Hannah stammered while still in shock at the news. Questions were swirling around in her head.

"Did they know her birth parents?" "Why did they choose to give her up for adoption?"

Hannah's adoptive parents could only assure that they loved her and that someday she would find answers to her questions.

Although Hannah didn't know it, Linda had been quietly searching for her since the meeting with Johnny at the cemetery. Linda found herself looking at every young girl who she saw at the mall, in church, or on the street, hoping to see a resemblance to Nikki. As the years passed, Linda began to lose hope that she would ever meet her only granddaughter. At the end of a particularly exhausting day, she reached for the Bible on her nightstand to read a few verses before going to bed. The Bible opened to 1 Corinthians 10:13.

No trial has overtaken you that is not faced by others. And God is faithful: He will not let you be tried beyond what you are able to bear, but with the trial will also provide a way out so that you may be able to endure it.

As she drifted off to sleep, she knew that she would never give up her search.

Hannah was also searching for her birth family. She approached the adoption agency that had handled her adoption. By law, adoption records are sealed in the Commonwealth of Virginia, so her search went nowhere. She only had a couple of clues as she began her search. Her adoptive parents had kept the first name, Hannah, given to her by her birth parents as a good will gesture toward them, and she was told that her birthday was October 30.

Hannah was beginning to lose hope when she had one last idea on how to locate her birth parents. She saw an advertisement on TV for a DNA test kit from one of the genealogy search companies. She ordered the kit, spit into the container, and submitted her sample for testing. She awaited the results like waiting for Christmas morning to arrive.

She raced to check her email on the computer in the family room immediately after she got off the bus from high school for the next several weeks. Finally, after about a month had passed, her prayers were answered. She received an email with information on close family matches for several potential family members including her potential grandmother. Sadly, nothing was included for her birth father or mother.

Her potential grandmother became the focus of her search. The file from the DNA company included an email address for Linda. Hannah sent off an email and waited anxiously for a response. The response came in a phone call the next day.

“Hello, is this Hannah who sent us an email about a DNA match?” Linda inquired.

“Yes, my DNA test said that we might be related,” Hannah replied.

“Well, I would be happy to meet you at McDonalds in town to discuss our family history,” Linda responded as they set a time to meet the following afternoon.

Linda was sitting at a table in a remote corner of the restaurant as Hannah came through the front door. For a moment, she was taken aback at how much she looked like Nikki. Hannah introduced herself, and Linda added “Hannah was my mother’s name.”

Hannah sat down at the table and began to ask Linda about her family.

“Did your daughter give a baby up for adoption about eighteen years ago?” Hannah asked.

“Well, yes. Her name was Nikki Mullins, and her boyfriend was Johnny Jones. I learned that they had a baby, and I have been searching for her for the last several years.”

“Where does Nikki live now?” Hannah asked with growing excitement in her voice.

“Hannah, she passed away a dozen years ago when she crashed her car into the concrete wall in town.” Linda replied. Tears flowed down Hannah’s face upon hearing the news.

“Are you sure?” Hannah pleaded.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Linda sadly stated. “Your birth father is still alive and serving in the Army in Afghanistan. He will be returning to Oakton soon, and I’m sure he will be anxious to see you.”

Both Hannah and Linda sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity.

“I have so many questions. Why was I given up for adoption? How did Nikki die?” Hannah continued almost in a whisper.

“We have time to discuss all of that. For now, I just want to hold you close” Linda happily exclaimed as she rose to her feet to embrace Hannah with a warm hug.

“I’ve visited the scene of Nikki’s accident at the concrete wall for years. I often grieved that I would never have any grandchildren,” Linda commented.

“I watched you for years from across the road as you placed flowers and gifts on Nikki’s memorial, but I never knew who you were,” Hannah responded.

Just like that, Linda gained a granddaughter who she never knew, and Hannah gained another grandmother. Linda was filled with emotion as she looked into Hannah’s sparkling blue eyes in the years that followed and felt like she was looking into the soul of her long lost daughter, Nikki.